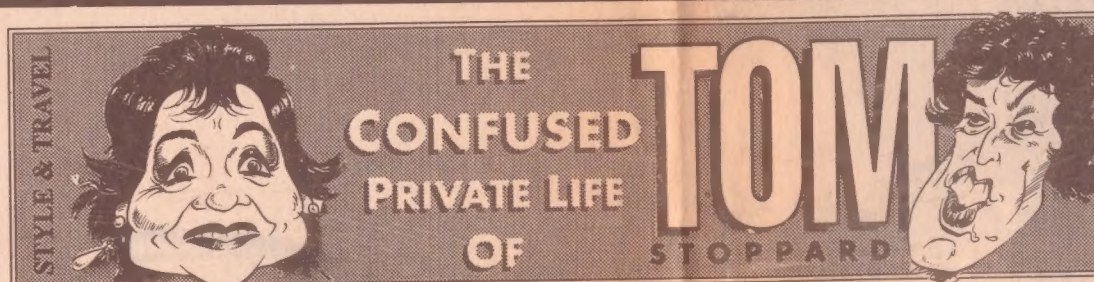




# THE SUNDAY TIMES

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## Jet in near miss with 'mystery missile' over

THE mystery of how a passenger jet almost collided with an unidentified missile over Kent is being investigated by the Civil Aviation Authority.

The incident occurred as the Alitalia jet carrying 57 people crossed the Kent coast en route from Milan to London two weeks ago.

The pilot, Captain Achille Zaghetto, said he saw an object, which he described as a missile, travelling in the opposite direction. It passed less than 300m away. At the same time an image was detected by radar operators at London Air Traffic Control Centre at West Drayton.

A CAA spokesman said: "Extensive inquiries have failed to provide any indication of what the sighting may have been."

The Alitalia jet, a McDonnell Douglas MD80, was travelling on one of the busiest air lanes in the world, which carries holidaymakers and business travellers from the Continent to London.

The pilot described the missile as "light brown and three metres long". His report was logged by air traffic controllers at West Drayton, the control centre for flights into London, on Sunday, April 21, at 9pm. Radar op-

erators simultaneously observed a trace 10 nautical miles behind the plane, consistent with the pilot's report.

Duncan Lennox, editor of Jane's Strategic Weapons Systems, said the description fitted that of a target missile, used for artillery and air defence practice. Target missiles are typically 3.5m long, turbo-jet or propeller powered, and fly at about 400mph.

The reported near miss occurred almost directly above Lydd Ranges, a Ministry of Defence firing range in Kent. The area, marked on navigational charts as danger zone

### INSIGHT

D044, is run from Shorncliffe Camp, 10 miles away.

Air traffic controllers at Lydd airport confirmed that weapons testing is carried out at the Lydd range directly under the flight path.

"They (the MoD) notify us when they're firing. We're never told of any missiles. It's all top secret," said Cleo Proctor, duty controller.

But an MoD spokesman denied there were any military operations in the area. "The area in question, because it's a

very busy civilian route, is not somewhere we are allowed to exercise," he said.

According to Lennox, a target missile, although it does not carry a warhead, could destroy an aircraft. "If it hit the cockpit, it would kill the crew and bring down the airliner."

A rogue missile was the suspected cause of the mysterious crash of an Aer Lingus Viscount, which plummeted into the Irish Sea from 17,000ft, with the loss of 61 lives, in 1968.

New light was shed on the mystery when in 1974 fisherman trawled up fragments of a target missile or pilotless aircraft. The plane was on a flight path south of the military rocket testing range at Aberporth on the Welsh coast.

The CAA publicly confirmed the sighting only last Friday. Its statement said the pilot had described a "missile-shaped" object. But Zaghetto was specific in his account to air traffic controllers that what he had seen was a missile.

CAA experts first thought

the object might be an optical illusion. Recording confirmed the object had been seen. There were no other sightings in the area.

Al Reid, supervisor of Traffic Control, viewed Zaghetto's sighting as a "missile-shaped" object. But Zaghetto was specific in his account to air traffic controllers that what he had seen was a missile.

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NEWS REVIEW

## Ar miss with 'mystery missile' over Kent coast

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the object might have been an optical illusion. But a radar recording confirmed that the object had left a distinct trace. There were no other aircraft in the area.

Al Reid, the operations supervisor at London Air Traffic control who interviewed Zaghetto after he landed at Heathrow, said the sighting was confirmed by the plane's co-pilot. Both saw it for two or three seconds.

Reid said it was conceivable that the pilot may have seen an optical illusion and that the radar trace could have been a

cloud. "We're really quite flummoxed," he said.

In 1980 an Italian DC9 vanished into the sea near Sicily with the loss of all 81 people aboard. A radar recording showed an unidentified flying object on collision course with the plane just before it vanished from the screen.

Two years later another Italian DC9 was flying at 27,000ft when it was narrowly missed by a mystery object that exploded close by. Passengers said they saw a "fast-moving projectile, like a missile".